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before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE
AND AGENCY ORGANIZATION
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF HIGH GAS PRICES ON
FEDERAL EMPLOYEES AND OTHER WORKERS

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the Department of Transportation (DOT) to discuss the issue of mitigating the impact of high gas prices on Federal employees.

My emphasis will be on the long-term, and our long-standing practice of avoiding fuel consumption among our employees.

One way we encourage this is by offering all Federal employees a mass transit fringe benefit program, where the employee can receive up to \$105 a month for taking mass transportation to and from work. This benefit can be

used for Metro, buses, and van pools. Within DOT we also publicize shuttle services and other alternative means of mass transit.

My focus today is another way in which DOT discourages gasoline use -- by encouraging the practice of telecommuting by our employees.

According to Government data, some 44 million people go to work by turning on their computers, or by picking up the phone.

And the need to encourage telecommuting has never been greater. Supplies of gasoline are projected to be tight for some time. As the Subcommittee well knows, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita sent the price of gasoline, already high, to well over three dollars in many communities.

Mitigating the impact of disasters is another reason for telecommuting.

When disaster strikes, there is less chance of vital government services being disrupted if the employees are geographically dispersed. Telecommuting can thus help maintain continuity of operations for critical governmental functions.

The benefits of telecommuting are many, including reduced gasoline consumption and a related downward pressure on gasoline prices.

Employees working from home save on gas, on tolls, and on automobile maintenance. Telecommuting also supports DOT's number-one priority – safety – because reducing congestion makes traffic management easier and safer.

The 2001 DOT Appropriations Act requires its agencies to establish policies by which employees can telecommute “to the greatest extent possible without diminished employee performance.” In establishing the DOT Telecommuting Policy, Secretary Mineta noted that telecommuting offers “a work flexibility and management tool that can assist all of us in better managing our work, personal, and community lives.” The goal is to reap the benefits of telecommuting without diminishing workplace efficiency or the work ethic of employees.

In 2004, the Office of Personnel Management conducted a Telework Survey of DOT agencies. The survey tallied the number of personnel in each agency who are eligible to telecommute, and how many actually do telecommute. Of the Department's 57,000 employees, 46 percent are eligible for

telecommuting. The agencies with the highest rates of participation are the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Fully 59 percent of FTA employees are eligible, and of these 55 percent do participate. 57 percent of FRA employees are eligible, and 54 percent of these telecommute.

Given its high participation rates, let me expand on the FRA program. The FRA field force of over 500 employees, geographically located in eight regions, oversees the safety of a huge U.S. network of railroad lines. The nature of Railroad Safety Inspector work demands spending little time in a traditional office setting. This made it logical to generate savings through the telecommuting effort by closing some field offices and reducing space in existing facilities.

FRA's telecommuting policy covers all FRA employees. Participation is based on job content rather than job title, and each office developed its own implementation plan. Telecommuting has also been used:

- By employees with medical problems
- For review of legal documents

- For accounting functions.

DOT actively encourages telecommuting. Various DOT agencies provide users with the necessary equipment. The Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration (FMCSA) supplies 802.11 wireless networking for its border control offices in Texas, California, and Arizona. The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) offers PC cards for Internet connectivity on DOT's virtual private network. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the FAA, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), and the FRA all supply wireless cards on laptops for connecting to the Internet.

Much more work needs to be done to encourage telecommuting. Two particular barriers that have hindered its greater use are expanding the technology base, and management adoption of the idea.

Regarding the technology base, we need to address the ability of residential network services to provide sufficiently robust connectivity for home-based teleworkers. This matter relates to the "digital divide" separating computer "haves" from "have-nots". While 67 percent of urban and suburban residents

have Internet access, much of that is in dial-up access, which is quite slow for business purposes. Broadband access is a necessary component to expand telework.

Security is another issue. Any telecommuting program must have strong requirements to protect Government systems and data as networks are “opened up” to accommodate the home-based workplace.

As for management adoption of telecommuting, we need to demonstrate not only that productivity does not suffer when employees work from home, but that work efficiency and employee morale benefit from such a transformation.

In summary, DOT has an effective telecommuting program in place. It has increased the adoption of telecommuting while enabling eligible employees to perform their work effectively. Moreover, we expect adoption of telecommuting by employees and managers to grow further as broadband capabilities are extended. With this additional connectivity, more employees will spend what used to be their drive time as telework time.

That concludes my remarks. I would be pleased to respond to any questions the Subcommittee may have.